

WORDS SO FAR

a short story collection

by

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Contents

The Ground Beneath His Feet	4
Jean	10
Let Go, Take Flight, Aim for a Taller Tree	20
The Headland.....	30
Frozen Sun	38
The Storyteller	49
The Tale of the Travelling Man.....	54
Song.....	58
The Refusal	66
The Burrower	74
Lágrimas	79

The Ground Beneath His Feet

8th April, 2010

Gods are great, but the heart is greater.

For it is from our hearts they come, and to our hearts they shall return...

—Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (Ch.14)

He took a sledgehammer to the brownstone wall, shattering the thin plaster with the first blow and dislodging an island of mortar on the fifth. He looped the bike chain around and padlocked it tight against the chunk.

The security guard had already ambled across to his hut to gather up his assortment of keys. The automatic doors cycled before he even rounded the corner. The brownstone chunk bashed dents in every step up to the first floor like some demented bulldog on a leash until he decided to take the elevator. It *pinged* at the top floor. The terminus.

The door leading out offered no resistance. He lugged the brownstone chunk up onto the low wall that framed the gravelled rooftop, and clambered up after it. The world pitched, switched perspective: The city-sprawl stretched out like the lens of the world had perfected the contra-zoom; latticed ground rolling up to meet the orange sky. He wrapped the end of the chain around his left shank. The first inch of his dust-spotted sandals teased the lip of the drop, persuading granules of plaster to free themselves from their purchase. He stared down at the abyss, and decided it would probably all be okay.

Click.

A chill ran along the spine of the night.

'Oh.'

Blue smoke crept into his nostrils. The door closed behind him, the latch *clicking* back into place.

'The show's starting any minute now,' he said.

The brief sound of lips creasing into a smile, like the crackle of a wood-fire a room away.

'A once-in-a-lifetime spectacular. No interval, no ice-cream. The greatest show on earth.' Three beats. 'Miserable old place.'

'I like it,' said the air behind him, floating a voice across the gap as if his back was to an open window, and a silk curtain was gently brushing his ear to the beat of the breeze. 'It has charm.'

'Springer spaniels have "charm",' he replied. 'The world is... what is it? "Sound and fury".'

'I like it.'

'I haven't slept. I don't sleep. I've got bags under my eyes.'

'That's okay. Nobody looks at your eyes.' He felt her presence slink up onto the wall. He considered that "slink" was the wrong word, because it implied a feline allusion. Cats had always been straightforward creatures, always landing on their feet.

'Nobody looks at yours, either.'

'I know. The plastics industry was a Godsend. It certainly made up for the Suffragettes.'

A turquoise smoke ring drifted across his eyelid before dissipating against the glow of sodium-vapour.

'I'm gonna do it, you know.'

'I know. You've had a hard life, all of that cattle rustling and being languorous around the harp.'

'Liar,' he said. 'You know I had to be always on, always performing. My life's been soaked in death. All those crossings.' He kicked his heels against the flat of the wall. She took a breath. 'And don't try to persuade me that I "rose above it", or I "was always light on my feet" or something. It's trite.'

'I know.'

'Jokes are for cowards who won't face up to anything other than irony.'

'I know. Your Achilles heel. You always had a tendency to play it straight.'

'Tendency? Was that a joke?'

'No.'

'Good.' He refused to look at her. For her part, she remained absolutely still, and blew no more smoke rings. 'You're doing a pretty shitty job of talking me down.'

'I know.'

'Good. Just so you know.'

'Mind, you're not doing a very good job of shuffling off your coil. What's with the brick?'

He lifted his right leg half-heartedly, and wiggled his foot in mid-air. 'Weight.'

She exhaled a thought into the night air. 'The captain goes down with his ship. Except the ones who chain themselves to the mast.'

'Cowards.' Five beats. 'What happens if you push me?'

'Street art,' she said.

'What *happens*?'

'Mr. Sound and Fury himself. Raining down from above. Use your imagination.'

'Turning himself into Swan matches, that kind of thing?' He picked at the stone wall with a finger, lodging chippings under the nail. 'Bloody swans. Of all the creatures...?'

'Only one with a, y'know. A fellah.' She dangled a hand back and forth. The nails were long, varnished. Rose-red.

'Sounds like him. Randy little bastard.'

'He prefers "mercurial". Like you.'

'*Like* me.' He shook his head. 'You're not gonna push me, are you?'

'No.'

'Good.'

'Do you want me to give you the speech? No one will remember you. We've all got it tough. It's adaption, not decay.'

'No.'

'Good. My throat hurts.' She blew another smoke ring, hazier and less defined than the last. 'These things are useful, though. Men like a woman who can blow rings around them.'

'I'm glad you're prospering.'

'What did it in for you?'

'Adaption decay,' he said. 'They invented the aeroplane.'

'Oh.' She shrugged, and doused the cigarette on the skin of the wall. She glided to her feet, and left without another word, leaving him kicking his heels.

Click.

A feather fell to earth.

Jean

13th December, 2009

Her world collapsed on Tuesday, November 9th. The phone-call came at an early hour (Jean could not recall which precisely) and the nurse on the other end of the hissing line cleared her throat and said 'I'm afraid Mr Catchpole died during surgery'. Jean took the news well, replaced the receiver on the hook after wishing the nurse a good day, and turned over that first sentence in her head. *I'm afraid*. The corners of Jean's mouth drooped downwards in a thoughtful expression that had been captured on so many family photographs over the years. *What do you have to be afraid about?*

The funeral was a small affair. Twelve or thirteen people showed up, at least three of whom Jean could not say she recognised on sight; the rest were family members from various segments of the British Isles, to whom Jean had not spoken in many years.

She remembered looking down at her black shoes as the coffin was lowered into the grave, and marvelling at how the spots of rain slipped off the suede material to disappear into the dark grass.

She released a small handful of dirt into the pit, and afterwards cried to herself in her kitchen. The episode lasted for roughly forty seconds, after which Jean busily dried her eyes and got on with watering the orchids rising from their vase at the window.

Clive Barker came to call the following day at around eleven, bringing a bouquet of lilies that Jean placed into a vase a quarter-filled with water. Mr Barker shook out

the rainwater from his umbrella, standing out in the porch to do so, then offered to make tea. 'I was so sorry to hear the news – so sorry', he said, bringing in two cups of steaming tea on the silver tray from above the cooker. 'I'd only known Derek for all of six months, but it's a terrible loss. Such a terrible loss'.

Jean nodded, and sipped at the tea, which was too hot and a half-teaspoon too sweet.

'How are you coping?' Mr Barker asked, and Jean replied that she was coping well, and took another sip. Mr Barker pointed out the orchids visible through the doorway. 'Derek liked orchids, didn't he?' Jean nodded.

Clive Barker excused himself eventually, apparently having left himself little else to say and no further reason to linger in Jean's home. She tidied upstairs, making time to brush down Derek's suits hanging in the wardrobe. She ran her fingers under the collar of his dark-brown tweed suit; the one that smelled of September 8th at the Old Boys' Club. She made a start on setting the Hoover between the banisters until her right leg began to twinge, whereupon relinquished her cleaning rota to take a nap on the settee.

Derek visited her in the night, appearing in the hall doorway. He had his flat cap planted securely on his head, and his round eyeglasses shone in the standing lamp.

Jean squinted into the darkness from the settee. 'Come closer. I can't see you', Jean said, but Derek simply watched his widow peacefully from the doorway.

Jean could not help but close her eyes at the sight, and when she opened them again, Derek was gone.

The following three months passed without any incident to speak of, beyond one of the orchids taking a turn for the worse, though Jean simply released it into the compost bin at the foot of the garden, where it was swallowed by the dirt. She made sure to water the surviving six orchids three times a day, and the lilies if enough water remained in the jug.

On February 20th of the new year, Clive Barker came to call again. He made tea, which was still too sweet, and proposed that Jean should come along to the book group on Sunday week. 'I think it will do you good, Jean. What do you say?'

Jean agreed, and came along to 15 Winfield Avenue that Sunday. The group was small, only six in number, Clive included, but everyone welcomed Jean warmly and none of them minded that she had not read the book they would be discussing. The book was Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie*, and the group as a whole praised it highly. Jean listened attentively but declined the various offers of refreshment.

She walked home alone two-and-a-half hours later, and had an early night. She fancied that, in the depths of sleep, she heard someone knocking on the front door, but it was late, and Derek had, as a rule, never answered the door to callers beyond nine in the evening.

Jean put the knocking out of her mind, and drifted away into a dreamless slumber.

Clive invited Jean to the book group again for the following week, when the book was to be *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Jean recalled reading the play many years ago, perhaps during her schooldays before she met Derek, but she could not recollect what exactly occurred within its pages. The group praised it nonetheless, and Jean smiled at their little jokes about handbags and wallpaper, and allowed Clive to walk her home once the little congregation drifted off to their separate homes.

‘I saw the film adaptation back in, oh, fifty-two? Fifty-three? I thought it was quite good, though I’d never seen the original play. I suppose it was quite good, for the time’.

Jean waved Clive goodbye at her door. The lilies died overnight.

Her kitchen flooded the following week. Mrs Everett next door telephoned the fire brigade after seeing Jean dashing to and fro between her back door and the outside drain, balancing basins full of water in her sagging arms.

Jean was exhausted by the time the fire engine arrived, and allowed the fire-fighters to wrap her in a blanket and give her a flask of steaming tea. It didn’t have any sugar in at all, so Jean only took a few sips before handing it politely back.

She watched as three men bailed the water out of her home, carefully removing certain waterlogged items out into the front garden to dry. They managed to salvage Derek's book collection, which Jean had maintained with great care.

One of the firemen, who was tall and bore a striking resemblance to Jean's nephew Stephen, asked her how the flood had started; Jean replied that she had simply been watering her orchids, and must have let the tap run.

The firemen carefully carried everything back into the house once they had finished, and the chief, having spoken with several of the neighbours who had gathered at the scene, gave Jean the number of a bereavement counsellor. Jean thanked him.

Four days later Jean developed a case of hypothermia, brought on, she concluded, by the damp still lingering in the house, rising from the kitchen to Jean's bedroom directly above. Doctor Clements treated her, and suggested that she leave the house for as long as it would take for the Property Care Association to send their people out.

He peered out from the glow of his computer monitor and asked, 'Is there anywhere else that you can go?'

Jean replied that there was nowhere she could think of, so the doctor arranged for a stay in the local hospital, St. Jude's, which generally had a low intake and would undoubtedly have a bed free.

Clive helped Jean move her things in to the ward (St. Augustus', Bed 3, closest to the window) and sat with her for the first few hours, every so often asking how she was for tea. Jean was fine for tea.

Once Clive excused himself, Jean rested her eyes and thought on her house, and on how careful she hoped the cleaners would be with her belongings. She and Derek had pieced together their little home over the course of their conjoined life, and she would truly hate for any of her possessions to be accidentally damaged.

She had no dreams that she could recall during the three nights she spent at St. Jude's.

Jean returned home to find everything in its rightful place, bar a few items of cutlery tossed carelessly into the wrong sections of the tray, and the washing-up bowl was still upside-down out on the back porch.

Jean made sure to check on Derek's suits, and the trunk of his belongings in the bedroom, just in case.

Clive came to call within the hour, and they stood in the kitchen as Clive lamented the string of 'terrible tragedies' that had befallen Jean over recent months.

'Did you make an appointment with that counsellor?' he asked, and Jean replied that she had not, having forgotten all about the number handed to her on the day of the flood. 'You should', Clive said, and Jean agreed that she would make an appointment.

The counsellor's name was Mary, and she was a mother of three. 'My husband died seven years ago', she said,

lacing her fingers together in her lap. 'But people helped me through it, so I wanted to try and help other people'.

She explained how she had felt at learning of her husband's death, and asked Jean how she had felt with Derek's death.

Jean didn't want to trouble the poor woman by recounting the event, so she simply said that she had felt upset, and asked after Mary's children. She said that she did not see her sons as much as she would like, but that it couldn't be helped. Jean felt very sad for Mary.

'I still see them, though', Mary said, tapping her temple, 'Our minds try to shelter us—they show us what we've lost, so that it stays in our memories and we might not miss it quite so much. It's like a comfort blanket, I suppose'.

Jean listened intently to the woman's advice, thanked her for the biscuits she had been offered and walked home thinking how hard it must be for a career woman like Mary to bring up a family. It had been hard enough for Jean.

She saw Derek in the night, standing at the window, as he sometimes did when his mind was troubled.

'What is it, my love?' Jean asked from the bed, but Derek did not reply, simply staring out of the orange-tinged gap in the curtains.

When she awoke at seven-thirty, Jean thought she could still see Derek's silhouette at the window, but it turned out to be a trick of the early-morning light. She went downstairs to make breakfast with a twinge in her right leg; she had always been bothered by it, ever since

she had tripped as a girl, carrying a pint of milk that had smashed on the garden path and cut into her leg. It had taken most of her mother's savings to pay for the treatment. The ache she sometimes experienced was like the ghost of that injury, having never moved on, always returning no matter how many years passed.

Clive noticed the slight limp in Jean's right side when he next came to call (with a box of biscuits for Jean) and suggested ways in which she could make her life easier around the house. 'Those stairs must be a killer', he said. 'You should think about turning the lounge into a bedroom, Jean. Just in case'.

Jean nodded, but she knew that she would not take Clive's advice. She had shared the upstairs bedroom with Derek for almost forty-four years (it would have been forty-four February past) and she felt too comfortable there to consider making a change now. She promised Clive that she would try to do as little walking as possible.

'I hope so, Jean. I'd like to make things easier for you, in any way I can. Even if it's only in little ways', he said. Jean thanked him earnestly, and he let himself out. His tea-making was improving; there had been almost the right amount of sugar in the cup he had made for her, but it still felt off-balance to Jean's taste-buds. Jean carefully placed the biscuit box on the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard, and closed the door firmly.

Clive invited her to more book groups, even suggesting they meet at Jean's house so that she would not have to travel, but she politely declined, and did not attend any further meetings.

The remaining orchids withered away that night, and she could do nothing but throw them onto the compost, watching as they sank into the waste. She left the emptied vase on the windowsill regardless, for she did not have anywhere else to put it.

On April 4th, 2000, Jean fell while climbing the stairs to bed. She tumbled down the stairs and landed on her back in the hall, hard, with a dull ache in her head and right leg. Finding herself unable to move, she gazed at the ceiling, which seemed to move in front of her eyes, refusing to keep still. For a moment she experienced a cold, clutching dread in the pit of her stomach, but then she felt Derek's presence over her, and the fear drained away. She could see his round glasses above her, and that slightly podgy face she had memorized and loved for the past forty-nine years: the rosy curve of his cheeks that made his eyes smile and glitter when he laughed; the wisps of hair falling across his bald spot; the crooked incisor on his top row of teeth that he kept promising to get fixed, but never would.

'It'll be alright, my love', Derek whispered, and Jean knew that it would be. Everything else drifted from her mind, until there was only Derek's warm face floating above her.

'I'm glad you're here,' she said, and smiled.

Let Go, Take Flight, Aim for a Taller Tree

22nd December, 2009

Someday, everybody learns that there is no Santa Claus. Jeremy didn't know what to think about his discovery, but he knew, in some small way, that it was a turning point: It was A Time.

There had been many Times. Jeremy remembered watching the World Cup Final on the grainy portable TV, snuggled inside his covers on the top bunk. He remembered his first day of school, and his first funeral. He remembered Sally Lewis, and he remembered cutting open his left knee. He remembered crying, and Nurse wiping up his tear-tracks with his hanky.

The images bubbled up inside his head at odd moments, and Jeremy wondered why they chose that particular moment to reappear. He hadn't thought about Sally Lewis for ages, as far as he could remember.

She had tripped over on the way out for morning break, and he had laughed. He didn't want anyone thinking he liked her—certainly not Adam and Keith—so he had laughed as she sat on the ground, holding her knee. He had watched as she hobbled in to see Nurse, leaning on Tricia's shoulder, and wondered why he felt a pang of disappointment.

'Are you going to Porstone next year?' she asked. It was sometime in November, when the school was a-buzz with the nervous excitement that stretched from the end of half-term holidays to the coming of Christmas.

The cloakroom smelled of wood polish, and it had always made Jeremy's head ache. 'Might', he said. 'If I get in. Mr Olivers says my maths isn't good enough'.

‘Yeah, and Mr Chambers says you’re gonna be famous one day!’ Sally grinned warmly, but Jeremy shrugged it off. ‘I think you’ll get in’, she added, fiddling with her coat hook. She had never mentioned the laughing incident. She had probably not even noticed.

Jeremy shrugged. ‘Might’.

On the walk home that afternoon—for they walked together as far as Crescent Lane, before she turned off to Barnes Close—Sally pointed up into a tree and said, ‘You know what that is?’

Jeremy shook his head.

‘That bird’, Sally prompted, and Jeremy looked harder. Clinging to the bark of the tree, hanging sideways over the drop to the ground, was a squat little bird with a pinched face and soft brown feathers. Jeremy fancied he saw a keen look in the creature’s glassy black eye. He had seen birds just like it wheeling about in the sky above the school, and though he had stood and marvelled at them, he had never thought to ask what exactly it was.

‘It’s a swift’, Sally said. ‘Father taught me. He goes bird-watching, you know. Twitching, they call it, but only when he goes far away. Anyway, that’s a swift. It’s an, um, an *apodiform*, I think. Isn’t that clever?’ She balanced on her tip-toes, pitching her torso sideways to imitate the swift’s near-horizontal stance. She flailed her arms, and rocked back onto her soles before she could tumble over.

Jeremy peered at the bird—the swift—curiously. ‘Do they all have names?’

‘Yep’, Sally said. ‘All of them do’.

Jeremy thought that couldn’t possibly be true; there were hundreds and hundreds of birds—lots and lots—and they couldn’t all have names, but he didn’t say this to Sally. Instead, they walked on their way until Sally veered off along her cul-de-sac and Jeremy took the road home.

Tricia lived on the same street, though she hardly ever left school at the same time as Jeremy.

He had a mind to look up swifts, but after trawling through the family bookcase, he found no books on birds, and let it slip from his thoughts.

He had never much cared for animals. He had been sad when the family pet had died, but he had not really thought of it as much of a friend. His parents had named it ‘Cat Stevens’, and had laughed whenever Jeremy had asked why. It had been a mangy thing, like something you’d want to kick after being shouted at.

Jeremy’s mother told him it died of old age, and she buried it in the flower bed. Jeremy, standing at his mother’s side while she shovelled dirt into the hole with a trowel, felt tears welling in his eyes, and he did not know why. He couldn’t be upset over a mangy, old cat, and yet he felt so out of sorts that he asked if he could sleep in his mother’s bed that night.

He snuggled into the covers, and dreamed about the dead old cat, buried under the dirt.

The swift came back several weeks after Sally pointed it out.

Jeremy was walking to school one Monday morning when he saw a shape gliding gracefully through the blue sky. He squinted up towards the sun, holding one hand to his brow, and made out a long-winged bird soaring high above the ground. It swooped lower, and Jeremy fancied he saw its feathers ruffling with the wind. It alighted on a tree, gripping the bark in that odd sideways position, and Jeremy realized it was a swift—maybe even the very same one. He nodded at it like it was an old friend, and went on his way.

It was one Christmas, a couple of years on, that Jeremy made his discovery. His parents had been out on a shopping trip a week before the big day, and Jeremy had spent the time excitedly searching for his presents whenever his parents were not around. It got to the point of annoyance that he found not a single gift-wrapped parcel, and his mother would only smile and say, 'Wait and see what Santa brings!' whenever he asked what he was getting.

Three days before Christmas, Jeremy came downstairs to find a giant heap of presents scattered under the tree. His mother had to hold him back from jumping on them and tearing off the wrapping. 'Wait and see!' she said.

Jeremy did not want to wait. He peered at the presents from all angles; he picked them up, shook

them and weighed them in his hands. He pestered his parents about them, and threw a tantrum when they refused to tell him. He counted them all, again and again, desperate for Christmas to finally arrive.

When it did, after a sleepless night, Jeremy bounded into his parents' room with his stocking packed with little boxes. 'Santa's been!' he cried, and set about ripping open his gifts with gusto; among them was an album by Cat Stevens, which made Jeremy laugh.

However, a nagging feeling began to creep over him, and by the time he had exhausted his stocking and the family had moved downstairs to start on the main presents, Jeremy finally understood what was wrong. There were no *new* presents. Santa had not left anything on Christmas Eve; and, looking back, Jeremy realized that all of the gifts marked, 'From Santa' had been under the tree for the past three days.

The discovery welled up in him like a sparking bottle-rocket, but he said nothing to his parents. He simply got on with opening his presents, one by one, dutifully giving thanks for his new belongings.

He saw the swift almost every day, up in the tree, and he passed it without a word or a nod, letting it go about its business.

Sally had indeed got into Porstone, while Jeremy had failed the exam by thirty-three percent.

'Don't worry about it', Sally said. 'There's always next year. Mr Chambers thinks you can do it'. But Jeremy no

longer wanted to go to Porstone. He knew that he would never be very good at maths, and there would be no point in going to a school that needed him to be.

Autograph books began to appear soon after, in the flurry of activity before summer set in. Jeremy watched as his classmates plodded methodically along the corridors, cornering teachers and friends and pushing little spiral-bound notebooks at them expectantly. Tricia tried to get him to sign her book. Jeremy sidled up to Adam.

‘What’s with all the books?’ he asked.

‘End of term, innit? Everyone’s gotta sign ‘em’.

‘Why?’

Adam frowned. ‘So’s we remember everyone’. Jeremy had assumed he would remember most people anyway, but nevertheless asked his mother for money to buy a notebook, and spent the following day traipsing around the school, looking for signatures.

He chanced upon Sally, who was already signing Martin Fathermouth’s book. ‘I’m gonna miss you’, Sally said, taking Jeremy’s book from him and bending over it to carefully write on the next blank page. ‘I hate to leave people behind’.

‘Well, I’m not going nowhere’, Jeremy shrugged.

Sally smiled. ‘You might’.

Her leaving was A Time, though Jeremy couldn’t recall the details. One moment she was there; the next, she had taken flight.

Jeremy counted eighteen signatures and well-wishing messages in his book at the end of term, several from Nurse and the cleaning staff.

He kept returning to Sally's message; a simple '*Good luck!*' signed with her name and an 'X'. It was a very brief message, but Jeremy continued to stare at it as he might stare at a full page of writing.

He turned back a couple of pages and happened upon a message from Mr Chambers. It was almost as short: Just his squiggly signature and one sentence:

'I taught Jeremy Blake.'

Jeremy thought that was a silly thing to have to write down, and didn't understand why Mr Chambers had bothered with it at all.

'A little something for the journey ahead of you, hm?' Mr Chambers had said, etching each letter onto the page.

As Jeremy considered Mr Chambers' words, he wondered where the elderly teacher would be when Jeremy had grown up. He flinched mentally, instinctively shying away from the thought. Jeremy had felt the sensation before: Once, lying awake in bed, looking up at the glowing stars his mother had tacked to his ceiling, Jeremy had wondered what happened to him if he died. Dead in a box beneath the earth, he would no longer exist—but he couldn't conceive of *not existing*, and wondered just how he would experience the rest of time. Forever, stretching onwards without Jeremy,

except what if he still existed, as a spirit, trapped in time...

Jeremy squeezed his eyes shut and boxed himself on the side of the head with a fist. He wasn't ready for thoughts like that. They scared him.

Mr Saltash was presenting a slideshow on the Egyptian pyramids when Katie squealed from the back of the class, pointing at the window and exclaiming, 'There's a dead bird out there!'

Mr Saltash *harrumphed* and paused his slideshow. 'Miss Bellmore, what on earth is the matter?'

'Out there!' Katie said. 'There's a dead bird!'

The class as one launched from their seats and crowded around Katie's table, peering intensely out of the window. Jeremy lingered at the back with Tricia, who needed a friend on account of her aunt's illness; he heard shouts of, 'There it is!' and, 'She's right!' but felt no desire to get any closer. He had seen plenty of birds, and he had watched his mother bury their cat in the flower bed. He didn't need to see this.

Sally still lived at Number Four, Barnes Close, even though now she departed and arrived in her father's Mondeo. She would essay a wave whenever Jeremy happened to pass by the mouth of the close in the morning or at the end of the day, but they had talked very little between the last day of term and her coming home to roost. Jeremy thought of her good luck message as her last words to him.

She often got out of the car with friends in tow, and on these occasions, she did not wave at all.

Tricia started to walk home with him, for she had not passed her entry exams either. They walked in silence, each wrapped up in their own thoughts, and parted at Jeremy's gate.

Jeremy didn't know if the swift still flew in to land on its tree; for he no longer cared to look.

The Headland

16th August, 2010

The headland sang with the call of passenger liners and mercantile steamships circling out in the green waters of the bay, hooting like birds coming home to roost.

Merton would stop to watch their comings and goings on his runs through the municipal park that encroached upon the spider-scrawl of the city's western limits. This close to the docks, the air hung heavy with the smell of seaweed. Merton tended to overlook the fact that seaweed mostly stank like a blocked drain, as Lucille had once pointed out, preferring instead to go along with the conceit that it was a sandy, salt-speckled aroma drifting into his nostrils. Nevertheless, he found the headland of far more interest than the inner city, which his running path gave a wide berth.

Dan worried that the two of them would become indoctrinated into the colossal brickwork jungle if they spent too much time enclosed within it. "We're country boys," he would say, "through and through."

The evening had been warm, the mood mellow, and the two friends had watched the gigantic ocean liners under assembly at the dockyards, imprisoned within huge cages of criss-crossing gantries.

"Country bumpkins," Dan had added. "The city just don't compare."

Their cottage had been small, the fulcrum of a circle of millraces and sluice channels gouged out of the marshland. Merton wasn't entirely sure if the cottage

really had been small, or merely only small in comparison to the enormity of the city.

His former life sometimes seemed small; and never quite as profound.

Still, Merton had enjoyed his life in the Fens, despite ducking out of as much hard labour as he could due to his meagre physique. His father had operated the steam engine, one of the last of its kind still churning water into the circle of the Great Ouse; and the young Merton had often contented himself with watching the big scoop wheel roll leisurely through its endless rotations.

Merton let his gaze drift beyond the immense, gleaming superliner sailing into view through the evening's emerald mist. Perhaps it was there that his fascination with the water lay: resting gently upon the grasses of the marshland, letting the moisture seep gently into his clothing, and feeling as comforted by it as if it were a wide blanket yielding beneath him.

Lucille had commented upon the peculiarity of that. Merton frowned out past the incoming ship, and called up more thoughts of home to soothe his mind.

His mother had died there. The thought stalked into his mind, blocking the pathway of his thoughts like an immovable object in the road. He wanted none of that, not now. The Fens had been a happy place.

And yet they had left for the city without a backward glance.

Lucille said it was instinctual to continually seek out bigger and brighter things. She had always been susceptible to the lure of the glittering lights and the echo of promises floating down from the great rising towers of the East Coast.

Merton recalled once telling her she was surely destined for *something shining silver like the moon, waiting out there amongst the stars*, and she had smiled. Thoughts have a way of returning to your waking mind when least expected, looming from the dark to impact like a blow to your kidneys. Merton had, however, managed to control his reaction to the thought, and when it broke through, it no longer made him cry.

The pumping-house in the Fens had suffered a case of subsidence ever since its construction in the last century, and, so Merton heard, it had finally surrendered to the lure of the tide two years ago. It had crumbled brick by brick into the recycled waters. On a September morning in 1911, the Fens had reclaimed that which they had lost.

The thought was a hollow in Merton's mind, a vast crack in the hull letting in nothing but the cold and foreign waters. He held no especial attachment to his childhood home, despite the memories he had; he and his brother had removed themselves from that life long ago. The cottage was a ghost, finally sinking under the corporeal waters.

"*Florid's* the word," Dan said, perhaps during the previous spring, in one of the early days of April when the flowers were blooming and the seas still shone. "*Florid*. Means you say all of these high-falutin' words that sail right over my head." He paused then, in Merton's memory chewing thoughtfully on a stem of wheat and shaking chaff into the vibrant grass, and said, "I looked it up."

"There wasn't much more to do than think, back home," Merton had said, though not to Dan. "We'd lie out on the grass in the evening and watch the stars come out through the clouds. Guess it means my head's still up there, floating about in the sky." Lucille listened attentively, the way she always had, her head tilted to one side and that keen brightness radiating from her green eyes.

"You've got an old soul," she told him. He had felt comforted by that. He had little interest in current affairs, finding nothing about the Mexican power struggles or the war in the Balkans to grab his attention. He rarely even picked up a newspaper these days. There was too much bad news out in the world. Too many disasters.

Instead, he had taken to running. His apartment lay in the financial sector, and it took Merton a good twenty-three minutes to complete half of his circuit, reaching the city limits where the park stretched out to the giant ships and the deep, dark blue. He took the same route every time; along the long row of looming, buttressed

solicitors' offices, skirting the smoke-wreathed dockyards and on through the high, iron gates of the park, lit by the dim, green glow of lanterns. Dan would probably have considered him obsessed, but Merton simply saw it as a way of passing the time.

He had begun familiarising himself with the patterns of the ships' routes in and out of the bay. He had spent time over the last year squinting out at the horizon, losing himself in the hazy shapes emerging from the mist with an avidity that had since slipped away. Now he no longer searched the indistinct line for the intrepid cable ships and the long, knife-like prows of the mammoth Cunard liners. There were no more souls to be ferried in from the North Atlantic.

Merton shook his head, as if the simple action would dislodge his troubled thoughts. The sun had already rolled below the line of the world, leaving a deep, red glow across the ocean, reflecting in the fiery sky. "It's God," Lucille had once proclaimed with that wild, bright look in her eyes, "giving us one last reminder that he's still out there before night comes in." She had laughed, and dived into the deep red, and Merton had followed. He no longer swam.

The Fens had been the ideal place to teach himself to master the water, and had swum laps of the width of the Great Ouse where the cottage backed onto the river. He had caught a glimpse of an eel once, stalking like a knife through the smoky waters, and Merton had

been oddly tempted to pluck it from the river and hold it in his hands for inspection.

He had not, however, and simply let the creature continue its route along the great circularity of the river. What if he had interrupted its flow? He considered how he might have altered the eel's journey had he picked it up that day. Would it have been intercepted by a larger predator if delayed; a fate it may have avoided had Merton not intervened? Or perhaps it had been devoured anyway, around the bend of the river where Merton could not see it.

He thought about destiny, and whether the world would have stopped turning if the eel had not been eaten when it should have been. Perhaps it had indeed been eaten, and the world had stopped all the same. More unwanted thoughts.

He scanned the ruddy horizon, searching for something to hook his attention upon. There was a gap in the flow of ships, and for the moment, the seas lay calm above the fallen sun. Merton strained his mind, trying to call up phantom ships to ride the bloody waves and distract his thoughts.

He saw the RMS *Carpathia* bringing home the masses, huddled and dispossessed; and behind, the unassuming *Mackay-Bennett*, sliding through the water like a ghost ship, carrying the dead to shore.

And further out, at the vanishing point where the deep red met the great black, he saw a grand ship of noble lines, a jagged wound gouged into the starboard

side of its flaking, metal flesh, frozen in place on the unmoving, icy waters like a gargantuan eel caught in a trap.

Sometimes he imagined he saw Lucille, a tiny figure swimming with the moon tide out of the green, making for the blood-red shore.

Merton let his eyes sink, and lifted himself to his feet. He forced his stiffened joints into motion, and moved on, circling away from the headland and making his return trip home at a light and measured pace.

He would come back, as he always did, like a boat on the tide, to gaze out from the shoreline to catch a glimpse of the ghostly ships that would never come home.

Frozen Sun

December 2010

The hitch-hiker was a dark smudge against the troubled canvas outside, growing like a bluebottle in the headlights, and was gone. Sophie felt a pang in her stomach, but there was nothing to be done: She pressed her foot to the floor, hard, while the blizzard rattled the cage of the Toyota. She was a newcomer to the American West, having an apartment in Severance with her husband where she provided technical support to Dell customers from her laptop.

From the salt flats the city rose quietly, so where a few moments before there had only been the storm, now a worry of black shapes peeled the sky apart and settled around her. She slowed.

Hospitals had comforted Sophie since childhood. People thought of them as clinical, but the curving, whitewashed walls and fleet of sugary nurses put her at ease, as if she could simply sink into one of the hoop-armed benches and be whisked away to be cared for in a little lime-coloured room of her own.

Mindy was on the front desk, fielding questions from a family of nine. Sophie met Mindy on her second trip to the hospital two Januarys ago, and talked to her for half an hour while smoking. Her husband waited inside, captivated with a magazine. Mindy asked about Sophie's grandmother, and sympathised. 'It's hard, isn't it? Especially this time of year,' she said, when the frost still lingered in the air. 'We get no end of calls—people ringing up to say they can't make it to see so-and-so cos of the weather, and could we pass on their regards. You know what really kills people out here?' She blew smoke into the air. 'The distance.'

Sophie watched Mindy patiently explaining matters to the family, and wondered how many times she gave the same answer to different faces. She left the receptionist to her

business, and followed the howl of the wind through the hollow walls to her grandmother's room.

The bed lay at the far end of the room, next to the window. The wrinkle-faced woman was sleeping. An oximetre sat on her left forefinger, over the yellowed tar-blisters from the filthy roll-ups she smoked since the age of thirteen. Sophie did not wake her. They had grown distant over the years, and now the crags and cracks of her grandmother's face seemed unfamiliar, as if Sophie were sitting at a stranger's bedside. The idea did not disturb her: Western America was a land of strangers.

It was her husband's idea to move from England. He considered prospects to be better in America, as if he were a pilgrim chasing after the gold rush. Sophie had been comfortable at home, and the borderless world of the States grew steadily wider in the gut of their marriage. She was all too aware that her husband was distant, but she did not know how to change things. They had tried—together—three months ago to bring themselves closer, and now Sophie had come to Cheyenne alone.

A nurse—whose name badge said Joanna—entered the ward forty minutes later to change the catheter. Sophie asked her if she minded changing catheters all day; Joanna said she did not mind so much, because she wanted to send her son, George, to private school. She picked up the chart and studied it.

'Have the doctors explained things to you?' Joanna asked. 'It's hereditary, the illness.'

Sophie nodded. The nurses here were so direct; it still surprised the little girl from England snuggled somewhere inside Sophie.

'You should get yourself checked. We have the best facilities here,' Joanna said, though Sophie disagreed. She

would have preferred her grandmother to be kept closer to home, though the local facilities in Fort Collins tended to cater exclusively for the more delicate and rarely-spoken-of a woman's operations. 'We can schedule an x-ray, although an ultrasound would give us a rough estimate,' the nurse continued, 'have you gotten yourself checked?'

Her stomach fluttered at the thought of an ultrasound. 'It's fine,' she said, in the same distracted tone her husband was, she knew, overly familiar with. The drive had tired her. 'Do people like to know, generally speaking?'

Joanna, tilting her head to one side, said that, generally speaking, people did. 'Is there anyone you can talk to?'

'No,' Sophie said.

She thanked the nurse, and continued to watch her grandmother sleeping. The old woman's eyelids were fluttering, and Sophie wondered what she was dreaming about—or if she was dreaming at all. On the straight, long line of her grandmother's life, perhaps there was no need for dreaming.

The blipping of the heart monitor brought on Sophie's somnolence again, and she briefly considered taking one of her grandmother's pillows. She wondered how she would feel when the old woman died, but she knew the nurses would take care of her just as the nurses in England had taken care of Sophie's mother.

Sophie, who had been eight, sat in the waiting room with a Coke, watching the patients go by, and when her grandmother had emerged from the ward in tears, the sight seemed alien to the comfort the young Sophie had surrounded herself with. She looked old and brittle, as if a single push would shatter her on the floor tiles. 'She's gone,' her grandmother had said, her eyes shining with the sharpness of fear. Sophie didn't know what that meant, but

she assumed the nurses had taken her mother to another place—a special ward to be cared for in privacy. She never asked her grandmother about it, and simply accepted the way things were.

It was close to five o'clock when Sophie left her grandmother's ward. She stood under the awning outside the main doors and lit a Lucky Strike, watching the last of the snow swirl to earth and the nurses going to and fro. She wanted to stop one, offer a cigarette, and give birth to the tangle of her thoughts—but the nurses roamed in packs, and Sophie stood in the shadow of the awning, shivering from the cold.

She drove west, up and along the Happy Jack route, which was far from home, but Sophie sometimes liked to take the car out into Laramie County and let the earth roll away beneath her. She was free from urgency now the snowstorm had abated, wrapped in the freezing calm that came in the pause where the afternoon ticked over into evening. The road slipped into the blackness of the rear view.

Sophie thought of each of the conifers that lined the highway as a child, born from the black earth, wobbling their inevitable way into the long walk from home.

A shape arose from the encroaching night; a thin, dark stick of a shape. Sophie wanted to squeeze the accelerator and send the ghostly thing flashing into the emptiness behind her, but she caught herself, and slowed.

She watched in the mirror as the hitch-hiker emerged from the darkness, though jumped all the same at the sound of the car door snapping open. Sophie's world gave a heave, and the shape was inside, settling wetly into the back seat—of which Sophie was glad; she balked at the thought of a

stranger so close at her side. ‘Thank you,’ he said in a high voice. ‘Glad that storm’s past. I’ve got business in Rawlins. Name’s Bill. Is that on your way?’

Sophie lied and said it was. The hitch-hiker tugged off his shoes to massage his feet. ‘It’ll teach me to buy an umbrella, I suppose,’ he said. She indicated, and drove out into the night, and under the glare of the headlights, the waddling saplings transformed into black figures thumbing their crooked branches from the roadside.

She focused on the tarmac, and the trundle of stone under rubber; stilled herself from glancing back in the mirror—but one hand was in the hitch-hiker’s pocket. A knife? A gun? His scent permeated the interior; a flat musk of wood fires that reminded her of the pub at home in Dorset, where she watched the locals come and go and pet the landlord’s Basset Hound. She and her husband were trying for a baby at that time, and the echoed scent brought fouler odours that made Sophie wince.

‘Where have you come from?’ He was looking into the mirror, a crease of polite interest to his sodden brow, but the question loosened the widening pit in Sophie’s stomach. *Where have you come from?*—a zero-point like the oncoming bend in the road that seemed to ask, in a whisper under the flesh of the hitch-hiker’s voice, the only question that could follow it: *Where are you going?*

‘Burgess Hill, originally. Now I live here—or hereabouts.’

‘Can’t say I’ve heard of it. I’m sure it’s nice.’

Sophie agreed. She had an urge to return to Severance, to climb into bed with her husband, but the shape in the back of the car pestered her like a fly buzzing around her head—and besides, her husband was working late, again.

‘Have you been into Cheyenne?’ he asked. He was scraping his fingers through his hair, trying to repair the

damage done by the storm. 'I go there with Mary—Mary's my wife. We're thinking of getting an apartment—nothing big, mind. An apartment.'

'My grandmother's there,' Sophie said, startling herself with the sound of her own voice. 'In the medical centre.'

'My Jimmy was born there. Ten-pound-five, can you believe that? He was a whopper.'

Sophie wanted to ask the stranger—this Bill—about Jimmy, but kept quiet, every so often her gaze drifting to the dark shape in the mirror. He was hiding broad shoulders under his greatcoat, and Sophie imagined him wearing a white Stetson, striding out onto the plains. Her husband preferred the closeness of the city.

He talked about his son's soccer team, his girlfriend—who Bill didn't approve of, but her father was into stocks and doing well, and after all, Bill wanted to buy a Corvette.

'How about you?' Bill asked. 'D'you have any kids?'

'No,' said Sophie, and thought of ultrasounds.

'Maybe someday then, huh?' Bill stretched his arms across the backseat. 'Me and Mary waited a good few years—we met in high school, though, second day there. She was an angel, I tell you. Real pretty, even back then. They're, uh—what's the word? Cathartic, could be. After all the noise and tantrums, the shitty nappies—pardon me—and all the stress, they're damn well worth it.'

Sophie kept her eyes on the road. The night was drawing fast and heavy, and the raggedy headlights did little to pierce the onrushing gloom. The trail curved around the thick blanket of the Medicine Bow forest, and would soon roll beyond Elk Mountain to Rawlins. Sophie had not set foot outside of the car on her westward sojourns, and felt a desire to nestle among the pines and witness sunrise over the foothills.

As if following her train of thought, Bill said, ‘S’posed to be moose up in the mountains. Bighorn sheep, too. My grandpappy won a shearing contest up in Hutchinson with one of those. Mind, that was back when the ranchers were still holding out. Fading, but holding out.’

Sophie let his words wash over her. She felt she had not allowed the stranger to explain himself enough; he remained a dark shape in her mirror, and the flat criss-cross of Rawlins town would soon creep around them. She had the urge to talk, if only to inspire the same in Bill: To tell him about her life, about her grandmother, about the long, slow road the old woman was travelling down; about where she had come from and where she was going, and how things had changed over the past three months, like a tree taking root under solid ground—but those were old wounds, and she had a stranger’s story waiting to be told.

She did not prompt him; Bill talked of this and that—of minor details, sketching the countries of his life but never dipping closer. He loved his wife, and they were saving for a vacation to Nebraska. Jimmy was studying for his ACTs. They tumbled on along the veins of the road. The waving conifers blurred.

‘Is this the way to Rawlins?’

Sophie looked up. ‘Yes.’ The road was straight ahead.

The lump in the backseat leaned forwards. ‘I don’t think it is. I think there was a turn-off a mile or so back.’

‘I didn’t see one.’

‘About a mile back. There might be somewhere to turn round ahead.’

Sophie gripped the wheel tighter. It was a dead-straight line.

‘I’m sorry,’ the lump said, ‘but I really think you’ve gone the wrong way. Could you pull over?’

'It's fine,' said Sophie.

'Pull over, please.'

'It's okay.'

The lump jerked, grabbing the parking brake and pulling; the car skewed left, into the oncoming lane and bumped onto the verge before Sophie thought to squeeze the pedal and bring them both to a lurching halt.

Sophie let out a breath. The car stalled, and the engine popped and hissed gently. The hand was still on the brake.

'Okay,' the lump said quietly. 'I think I ought to go, now.' It opened the door, and slipped out into the night. Sophie followed.

'Wait!'

The hitch-hiker's broad back was turned to her. 'Excuse me, but I'll walk if it's all the same.'

Sophie wanted to apologise—to bring him back inside the warmth of the car and to drive across the states with him. She wanted to bed him and hold him, and the thought did not worry her at all. Her life was simple: All rivers fall into the ocean.

'I'm pregnant, you know,' she said. He paused, and did not answer for what seemed like minutes. 'I don't want it,' she added, and considered: 'He doesn't want *me*.'

'I have to go,' said Bill.

'It's miles to Rawlins,' Sophie protested, but the broad and black-coated lump was claimed back into the sea of the night. She did not attempt to follow, and inflict herself on him any further.

She returned to the car and tried to phone her husband. There was no connection.

It was an hour from midnight when Sophie pulled in to the hospital car park, and there was a scent of beef burgers in the air. She wondered if roving burger vans stopped here.

Her bones were aching, and Sophie couldn't stand sitting in the plastic, hard-backed chair at her grandmother's bedside. There was no change in her condition, but the atmosphere in the ward felt cloying, so Sophie retreated to the main reception. She sat and watched the nurses for a long time, but there was no Mindy, no Joanna—only strangers, rubber-faced and aloof, orbiting their own bustling worlds.

She became aware of raised voices, and a baby crying. An elderly man was holding an ice-pack to his knee, while his carer, juggling his wheelchair and a pram, confronted two nurses.

'You should have signs,' she said. Sophie looked on, like she was staring out of a window; the drama belonged to someone else.

'We followed the procedures,' one of the nurses said.

'He could have broken his leg.' The old man dabbed at his knee with the ice, looking from the woman to the nurses with a pitiful expression. 'We can't have you people messing around,' the woman said, 'not doing things properly. There are all sorts of diseases in here, just waiting to get out! My daughter's only seven months.' She rocked the pram with a forceful motion.

The nurses assured her there were no diseases waiting to get out into Cheyenne. The baby stopped crying, too tired to make the effort.

The drive home to Severance was long, and spent with the radio tuned to Cowboy Country. Sophie didn't know any of the songs beyond what she thought was a Velvet

Underground cover, a crooner about an assortment of characters who 'ain't got nothing at all.' She thought of the hospital, and of the old man in the wheelchair.

She imagined a cluster of bacteria clinging to the armrests as he rolled out of the automatic doors, and saw the hospital giving birth to something monstrous; a howling creature carrying disease in its belly, walking not out into the world but destined to be borne back into itself, to live and die on the same tainted breath.

The car juddered. Sophie wrenched the wheel back, jerking out of the path of the cats' eyes. Her hands must have slipped from the wheel—sleep tugged at her like a tiny hand dragging down on her sleeve. She wanted to be back at the hospital, with a cigarette to calm her jangled nerves, asking to book an appointment at the specialised clinic in Fort Collins. She could simply let the tiny hand guide her, and bury herself in the blackness all around.

Her heart was racing, but the bubbling of her veins both vivified and dulled her. The road was clear; there was nothing to aim for out here. All energy became misguided. Sophie wondered if she would meet another hitch-hiker, far from the pulsing organ of the hospital; that familiar, black lump on the lip of the highway, tensed to spring from the darkness and into the river of her life. They grew solid like an oak tree, so that even the most fortified axe might not sever their roots. They were strangers without faces, with names, endlessly circling a frozen sun, forever waiting for her.

The Storyteller

2nd March, 2010

No one remembers the singer. The song remains.

—Terry Pratchett, *The Last Hero*

There is a story that begins in the swirling oils on the floor of a Romanic church in Stuttgart, built by the Counts of Württemberg. Truthfully, there are many thousands of stories that echoed in the chancel of the *Stiftskirche*, and this is merely one.

He is called the Storyteller, for he fits the form and the shape like smoke filling a bottle, and he sits in the circle of oils, drawn in a cascade around him, wearing down the smooth stones into troughs with infinite patience. The pigments reel and run, entwining in a dance of unity as his blemished and liver-spotted hands rest upon the surface; a millimetre down, letting the river flow around their presence. He is a stone in the stream of consciousness, and he lets the world revolve without him—which is not quite the same thing as if he had let the world revolve around him.

The oils swirl, and the Storyteller peers into their depths with hollow eyes. It is purely conjectural to wonder whether or not the depths looked back into him: It is, suffice to say, highly improbable. Nothing tangible lived between the oil and the stone floor, but the Storyteller plucked something out from the depths nonetheless.

He holds a story between his calloused fingers, and lets it free into the morning.

* * * *

They say the clouds rained a storm of blood, and a man fell burning from the sky.

He immolated in his pit, three-and-a-half feet into the surface of the Journada del Muerto as the scarlet rain fell around him. From where he came, there is no answer. Perhaps he fell from Heaven, and clawed into the cracked skin of the world; perhaps he ejected from the cockpit of his dying air superiority fighter-craft; perhaps he was the product of some infernal machine designated with the allocation of random human males to the aerospace three thousand miles above the New Mexican deserts.

He was found; there would not have been a story were he not. He said he *fell from the moon, up, up, fell from the up to the down*, and he screamed sulphur from a throat stuck with the cinders of his lungs. The three Piro herdsmen who discovered his crater did not understand his language, but nevertheless carried him to their pueblo to the north—later named ‘Socorro’ after other similarly hospitable efforts. Their priests waved prayer-sticks and burned incense as their shamans treated him with medicines and peyote, and though they doused the flames on his body, the fires that licked out from the hollow of his left eye-socket could not be quenched. The Piro decided to let it burn itself out.

He spoke again on the third day, to a medicine man, through cracked and babbling lips. *Have you seen?* He

said, and poked a thumb into the burning socket, wiggling it around thoughtfully.

I've seen. Up there. God is in the stars, and the All-Father, and Muhammad on his Mi'raj circling the heavens; and Krishna dances with Loki Silver-Tongue in the dark places. I have seen Judas hung by the neck from the eye of the universe, and the Riders of the Storm sailing across the night in a yellow ship made of Seraph bones. He retrieved his thumb and flicked out the flame that danced upon its skin like the dousing of a match.

I've seen the way the world ends, he said, and blew on his smoking thumb.

He walked out into the desert on the twenty-ninth day, and burned hotter than the sands with every minute. He was met by a wandering preacher outside Las Cruces, who approximated the length of the man's journey based upon later missionary excursions to Socorro.

He was 'Godless', the preacher reported several years after the meeting. 'I could feel nothing of the Divine in him.' The burning man had, it was said, not spoken a word to the preacher, 'as if some un-confessed sin had left him mute.'

Reports continued to surface of a burned man: The so-called Sulphur-Demon was glimpsed by man-and-wife bartenders in El Paso; the Immolated Man was sighted within a day of the figure known as 'He Who Walks with Fire' among the Zuni and Jemez people; while the Bonfire Man became an urban legend throughout the Spanish Main. Some said he was looking

for God; others, the Devil in his many forms. Some believed he was looking for absolution, while others mused that he was only looking to tell his story to whoever would listen. Of the man's own words, only one phrase had ever been recalled, depending upon the translation and beyond the findings of the missionaries. In several locations he had been seen wandering streets and pathways, talking to himself, repeating a sentence over and over:

I have seen the completeness of Creation, and it has enflamed me.

At least one tale claimed that the burned man finally settled in a church in southern Germany. The preacher from Las Cruces followed the stories here, to the hallowed ground, and found a wizened man wreathed in the smoke of incense burners, kneeling in a ring of oils. The man dipped his cracked hands into the cascade, and weaved a tale for the preacher.

The nature of that tale remained unknown, for he never relayed it to anyone. He simply left the church thus enlightened, and took a flight across the Atlantic Ocean, making for home. In Mexico, the sands stirred under the desert winds, and thousands of grains lifted up from the ground to merge with the darkening clouds.

The Tale of the Travelling Man

19th July, 2010

Long ago in a Russian winter...

A man came to the southern town of Verkhoysansk, his worldly belongings tied in a sack and slung over his crooked back. His wool-felt valenki boots left deep grooves in the snow as he walked along the winding pathway leading into the town.

The Angel of Death walked at his heel, His skeletal frame bent and sickly, and his scythe as sharp as Russian tin. The man never once turned around to behold his travelling companion, focusing instead upon the road that lay before him. He was starved, his bones showing through his skinny flesh, and he was tired from his long journey from the north.

Upon entering the town, the traveller visited each and every house in turn, knocking on each wooden door and waiting with trembling, half-frozen hands on the front step until the door was answered.

"I am a traveller from the north, and I have not eaten for twenty-two days," he would say to each homeowner in turn. "Can you spare bread or water for me, so that I might reach the border for the turn to spring?" And though his plea was sincere, and he was truly wasting away, each and every homeowner saw the figure of Death standing at the traveller's back, and each and every one shut their door, sliding bolts across and tucking their loved ones up in their beds.

So the traveller moved on, deeper into the town, stopping at every door along the way to recite his plea. And at every door, the faces that greeted him turned ghostly pale at the sight of his companion, and the

traveller was denied even the smallest amount of bread for his journey.

His fate was so throughout the town, seeing him pass from one side to the other without any hope of food or water.

At last, he reached a small cottage towards the outskirts of the settlement, where a family of woodcutters and log scalers lived. It was the mother, named Sayiina, who answered their door to the travelling stranger. "I am a traveller from the north, and I have not eaten for twenty-three days," he recited. "Can you spare bread or water, so that I might reach the border for springtime?"

The man's plea moved Sayiina, but she happened to gaze upon the spectre that hung like a shadow over the man's hunched back, and she gave herself pause. She recognised the figure as that of the Grim Reaper, and knew that His presence would bring bad luck to her household: But Sayiina, like her husband and two children, had been brought up to be respectful to strangers, and to always offer food or shelter to those without either.

"I can give you bread and water, stranger, and I wish you well on your travels," she said, knowing that her husband would say the very same. She went indoors to fetch a bowl of bread left over from supper and a small flask of water, and returned with both to the traveller.

Tears welled in the elderly man's eyes, and he shook Sayiina by the hand. "Thank-you! Thank-you!" he declared, "you are most generous! May the spirits bless

your house!” And with these words, he took up the bowl and the flask, and went on his way towards the border. Sayiina watched the crooked little man go, and with him the Angel of Death, following ever closely behind.

In the heart of the Russian winter, Sayiina’s oldest son, Elley, came down with influenza, and passed away on his bed before November was out. The family buried Elley’s body under the snow in the yard, and wept for him. The youngest son, who was named Aytal and was now feeling very alone without his brother, committed suicide a week later, drowning himself in a freezing pond. Him was buried alongside Elley, and their parents wept. Sayiina knew that the Grim Reaper had taken her two handsome sons, and she feared that her husband would soon be taken as well.

Sayiina died a week before the start of spring, having caught a chill while carrying logs for the fire from the woods at the edge of the town. Her husband, Nyurgan, buried her in the hard earth next to their two children, finding no reason to the suffering brought so suddenly upon his household. He went mad in the last week of winter, and died in a most violent fit on the doctor’s bed. He was buried with his family in the yard of their empty home.

The travelling man reached the border of the Yakutia Republic at the end of spring, and travelled on into the oblast territories; Death followed behind him with every step, and where he trod, the last of the snowfall melted under his feet.

Song

21st February, 2009

There are places in the world where the music never died. There are, over the far green hills, sonnets that sparkle in the twilight sky; melodies glittering like moonfish in a stream; the chorus of a choir echoing down the foothills of snow-capped mountains. And songs that voices never shared.

The faerie could hear them, sometimes, when the winds stood fair and the seas lay calm, calling out of the craggy passageways under the Mountain. Her gossamer wings had not fully finished sprouting from the ridge of her pale back, and she would strain to cast herself into the updrafts around the rocky berg, hoping to fly closer to its peak; to the stairway she knew lay on the whispering wind, that carried the music fluttering down from that lofty height. It infuriated the little faerie, though she was not usually one to become furious of anything; but the music arrived in her pointed ears as a weak thing: feeble threads falling from a silk gown left to gather dust on top of a tall wardrobe. The music was not complete.

Her friends down in the caverns did little to help. 'What music?' they would ask. 'You're hearing things!' the Clurichaun would exclaim, and try to drag the faerie along to the mead-house without doing a spot of work. But the faerie protested, and tried to convince them all of the music she half-heard every day, though her words fell on deaf ears.

Instead, she had flapped and fluttered her way out of the cavern and onto the foothills whenever she could, on any occasion when she could safely leave the hive for

a while. It had become a ritual, lasting for three whole months, so the trees grew bare and snowflakes began to fall from the frosty air. But try as she might, the faerie could not launch herself up to the source of those secret chords.

Her Grandfather, who was an aging Haltija with wisps of snow-white hair on his wrinkled scalp, discovered her sitting upon a smooth stone at the base of the Mountain, one rosy cheek resting on a balled fist, her eyes downcast. He eased himself onto the rock next to her, for he had long ago lost the use of his once-proud wings, and asked her what was wrong.

‘It’s the music, Grandfather’, the faerie said, casting her eyes up to the Mountain’s icy peak. ‘Can’t you hear it?’

The faerie’s Grandfather nodded sagely. ‘Ah’, he wheezed. ‘The music. Yes, I remember the music. I used to hear it too, you know. I used to think the tune would come at last, if only I listened hard. But it was so faint, back then. So soft’.

‘It *is* faint! It *is* soft!’ the faerie exclaimed. ‘I want to be able to hear it—*really* hear it—but I just can’t!’

Her Grandfather chuckled in an avuncular manner, and patted his granddaughter on the knee. ‘Oh, I’m sure you do. So did I. But, the days passed, and then the months, and the years followed, and in the end, I quite forgot about the music. Even now, even today, I can’t hear it. It has passed from me too, like time and tide’. With that, he gave another wheeze, and leaned back to

regard the tall Mountain with beady eyes. 'Time and tide', he repeated sadly.

'But I can't just give up!' the faerie implored, and her Grandfather chuckled again.

'No!' he smiled. 'No, you certainly cannot. And you mustn't—*mustn't*—give up, child, not ever. Or you'll end up like me, sitting here with my poor, broken wings'. He lifted one age-fogged tip, and let it fall limp at his back.

His granddaughter looked down at his wings, hanging still and laced with feathered veins. 'I'd like to end up like my Grandfather', she smiled. 'But a Grandfather who heard the music just once'.

At this, her Grandfather chuckled long and loud, and picked himself up carefully from the stone. He gave his granddaughter a cheery wave, and began to amble back towards the caverns in the Mountain, turning just once to call back: 'Listen, child! And don't give up until you have!'

The faerie sat on her little stone for a long while, thinking on her Grandfather's words, until she realized the trees were whispering to the tune of the cold night, and she retreated sorrowfully to the warmth of her cavern. She lay in her bed that night, looking up through a fissure in the rock at the stars as they began to wink out of the darkness, like splashes of brilliant white on an inky canvas spread over the sky. The music came to her in the night, and every note from the minor fall to the major lift was as distant and forlorn as ever. It seemed to the faerie to be singing a song of sorrow and grieving.

She dearly wished to know why the music had become so sad—so cold and broken—but with a somnolent yawn she slipped into the comfort of sleep, and for a time, the music left her mind at peace.

She awoke the following morning feeling brisk and refreshed, jumping from her bed and fluttering her wings to propel herself to the crack in the rocky ceiling. She grabbed a-hold of the edges of the stone and peered out at the morning, far away on the other side. She beamed up at the clear, blue sky, and the birds wheeling above the earth, and her spirit cried for leaving. She wished she could find out how to push through and join them in their song.

But she knew she had her duties to perform, and could not shirk them. She left her cavern and fluttered out into the bright morning, gliding for the cluster of bushy trees whose tiny, white fruits were still hanging ripe despite the falling temperatures. Rowan berries were thought to scare away the faerie-folk, as potent as the blood of a white owl or hanging the feather of a phoenix over the door to ward away inquisitive forest creatures. In fact, the fruit of the rowan tree had been used in cures and potions by the faeries for centuries, and the would-be curses concocted by the Humans were a source of great amusement to the faeries. The picking of the berries was almost an industry, and the faerie had made her living by gathering the fruits around the Mountain.

She worked diligently, taking great care when separating the little, white berries from their stems; too

much pressure, and they would burst. The faerie had become adept at her work, and carried the berries, one by one, over to her wicker basket. It was soon piled high with berries, but the faerie did not halt. The sun moved high overhead, and began to sink into the hills, and still the faerie toiled. After the heat of noon, she spotted her Grandfather perched on a stone by the Mountain, and waved to him. He waved back, and the faerie returned to her work, filling a second basket.

She was moving to the last clusters of white berries when the faerie chanced to look up, and found to her surprise the sky had darkened, a streak of rich indigo curving up from the horizon. The moon hung bright and round above. The faerie realized she had worked all day, and into the night. She yawned, and felt a pang of sadness that she no longer had time left today to bid her Grandfather goodnight, or to try once more to reach the Mountain's peak.

As she gazed up at the darkling sky, the first star of the evening shimmered out of the blackness, its weak light growing stronger and more incandescent by the second: a light in a silvery night. And as she gazed, it seemed as if, along with that far-flung starlight, a ray of purest music came down to her from the heavens; a weak thing, the distant call of transcendent strings, and it elated her. The faerie's gossamer wings began to flap of their own accord, and she found herself rising onto tip-toes, like a lightning rod for the descending music. Looking up at the winking star, the faerie was reminded of a story from her days in the nursery; of a faerie who,

curious about the stars that visited the sky at night, pulled one down from the heavens, and scorched away all life on earth. But the star, unable to help its destructive nature, set a cleansing fire in the faerie's body, and from that flame bloomed new life, faerie-born, to rekindle the world.

The faerie knew it was only a story, but she wanted more than ever to touch the stars; except *wanting* alone was not enough. She could not reach the music of heaven with her feet planted in the soil. The night was heavy, but the air was alive, and the tingle that ran along the faerie's spine told her that this was the night to accomplish anything. She carefully placed her full baskets under the bower of the rowan tree, and stood tall, staring up resolutely at the single, shining star. She beat her wings, once, and again, then again, each down-thrust stronger than the last, and she *lifted*. Her toes left the ground, and the faerie beat her wings harder, forcing herself bodily upwards. Her wings became blurs, flapping against the evening breeze, and she rose, higher and higher, leaving the ground far below.

She soared, buoyed by the wind, rising and rising towards that lonesome star. The wind blew harder, the sky grew darker, and the faerie kept flying, through wisps of cloud and ever on. She surged, reaching out to something intangible beyond the fading blue sky, her body tingling as if the air around her had become electric. It crackled with a million promises. The faerie briefly thought of her Grandfather, and something

inside her knew that today would be the last that she would ever see him.

The final specks of blue dissipated in front of her like the last drops of summer rain, and the faerie was left with an inky blackness spread around her, consuming and devouring her. Her ears popped, the music fell to silence, and she despaired. She hung, alone and tiny, in the pervading darkness. A millisecond passed; a nanosecond.

And then she heard it.

It bypassed her ears and burst like a sunflare into her head; her soul pulsed to the rhythm. Sonatas blazed stars into supernovas, solemn adagios tearing through time and space to lament their loss. The planets chimed with the clash of cymbals and the sound of drums, reverberating across the black sky, never stopping, never waning. The music rose from that first, single note that plucked the universe into being, chord upon chord, building movements like tapestries electrifying the sky; arias ripping black holes apart to an unearthly chorus, symphonies shining across the stars more brilliant than the starlight of a hundred million suns.

And the faerie swam in its glory, floating among the music of the heavens; of the spheres; the music of the universe. She passed on into enlightenment, the heartbeat of reality echoing through her mind, lost in a river of song, carried away by a moonlight shadow.

The Refusal

21st March, 2010

If you don't run, you rust.

—Tom Petty, *Big Weekend*

Y*ou dream of running. Headlong into the heat and the sweat, over white-hot sand under the copper-dusted air. Capillaries burst open by the million, but your lungs swell and you run on. You run with the heat at your back: Making for the heat-haze dappling the scarlet sun, and on; leaving the Endless Plain behind and crossing the Makgadikgadi in a day, and on, out into the wilds. The herd will run with you. The gazelles whip the dust in your wake, hooves snapping fossils. The fastest of them, the herd-leader, draws level and fixes you with a beady eye, black as jet, and says,*

follow,

but you do not want to follow, and risk falling into the scorching sands. You shake your mane. The herd-leader lows to his kin, and they turn tail, to disappear into the swelter. And you...

* * * *

Alexander barged through the crowd of suits-and-ties on the concourse, stamping on black-leather shoes and squaring his shoulders like a lion clawing for the front of the pack. The looming grey walls of the Green City's tangled web only soured his already bitter mood.

Growling under his breath, he reached the academy gates and swiped his card angrily, fumbling it on the stony ground and slipping through the closing gates with a whisker to spare.

He joined the line, flicking his fingernails on the metal railings as the hungry mass undulated slowly ahead of him, boots tramping like drumbeats. Clayton appeared at his back. 'What happened to you?'

'Woke up late,' Alexander said, without turning.

'You dialled in, right?'

'Obviously.' The gate would have remained obstinately shut if Alexander hadn't prostrated himself before the Aunt's pixelated visage before leaving the dorm.

'Julie's here.'

Alexander grimaced. 'So?'

'I'm just saying.' Alexander could feel Clayton's shit-eating grin boring into the back of his neck.

'Well *don't* say.' Why Clayton insisted on talking was beyond Alexander. It was the refectory line, not the dorm, or wherever people stood around and talked all day. 'So what if Julie's here?'

The grin could have burned into Alexander's neck. 'Buy her a For-One', Clayton said in a low voice. 'Buy her a For-Two. Or is that all in the past?'

Alexander pawed the railing in annoyance. 'She can buy her own food. I'm sure she's capable of it'. He cast his gaze around, looking for something to latch onto rather than turn to Clayton's grinning mug. A vine of some kind—a weed—was clawing its way up through

the cracked stone at the base of the railing, spreading from the hole like an encroaching scab. One, thin tendril was reaching up for the pole, curled at the tip as if preparing to wind itself around the metallic edifice. Alexander felt like kicking it flat against the pole.

‘Everything old is new again,’ Clayton sang, but Alexander didn’t rise to it.

‘There’s nothing between us,’ he said. ‘There’s just nothing.’

* * * *

He was typing up his data when the face of Aunt Martha materialized in front of him. He straightened out of his slump instinctively, and rotated his directional microphone.

‘Alexander, isn’t it?’ Her tinny voice reverberated past the small bone inside his ear. ‘Your mood dial has been showing a negative read this morning.’ Alexander hated the mood dial. It was almost as bad as Clayton.

‘I’m fine.’

Martha’s grainy image crossed its arms over its bosom. ‘You dropped three points in the Fifteen-B last week. Is there anything you would like to talk about?’

‘No.’

‘Perhaps a fault with the mood dial, then?’

Like himself, the students around Alexander had their earpieces firmly affixed, typing like clockwork, but he leaned in closer nonetheless, affecting a hushed tone. ‘No—just—nothing. I had a dream the other night,

that's all. It was... I can't really find the words,' he finished lamely. He hadn't even been able to save it to his private journal.

Martha tilted her head to one side. 'Well, I wouldn't worry about that. Take a rest over the weekend: Concentrate on the present—and your studies—and I'm sure your mood dial will soon be as right as rain. Just know that if you have any misgivings, I'm always here.'

'Yes, Miss,' Alexander said, and the teacher's image winked out in place of the familiar lines of scrolling text. He turned his mind resolutely back to the rhythm of his work.

* * * *

'Was Old Martha chewing you out?' Julie's head bobbed from side-to-side, as she always did whenever she was prying.

'No.' Alexander said. 'Doing her games with the dial. The usual.'

'I think all she does is read up on our data. And I don't like that thing—the dial. It gets inside our heads. And it's sending out micro-waves all over the place. It's not healthy.'

Micro-waves? What did she know about the bloody mood dial? She did *Metallurgy*. 'It's fine,' he said, short of saying anything more biting. He had expected her to be cleverer, once.

'I dunno,' she said, tilting her head to one side. 'I'm thinking of transferring.'

'You can't. How? Nobody transfers.'

'There must be ways. What about the people who move house? Aden went to Benin didn't he?'

'Yeah, to join the border patrol. Nobody transfers.' He shook his head, amazed at what a fragile grasp Julie had on the whole system. He had written all sorts of cutting remarks about her in his journal—all the things he had never said to her face.

'Well, I'll ask about it anyway,' she said uncertainly. 'Ade was always talking about going off and doing something. I guess you've got to fly the nest, huh; follow your calling and all that? I guess he thought he could be someone.'

Well so could anyone, Alexander snapped to himself. He was becoming irritable with the sun in his eyes, and Julie was back to trying to justify her actions again; like she had in the swelter of the gymnasium, after she had been so supine and inviting. That image of the girl clambering breathlessly over the chain-link fence repulsed him now, and he wanted nothing more to do with her.

'Class is starting,' he said.

'Don't worry about Martha. Mad Martha, we call her,' Julie grinned, and spun on her heel. He watched her walk away, scuffing her toe on the curb as she crossed the road. Alexander snorted in derision, and headed for the dorms. He logged in to his journal, mentioning Julie's stupidity, and Martha's incessant attempts to get him to talk.

* * * *

He didn't dream for the next three nights. The fire alarms from somewhere near the Materials Science dorms kept him awake most of Saturday night, and so he was in no mood when Clayton appeared at his back in the lunch line on Monday.

'Lemme guess; you want me to buy Julie something, huh?'

'No. She's not even here,' Clayton said, scanning the mass of faces. 'She never misses her class.'

'You buy her something if you're so interested in her,' Alexander snorted.

'How can I if she's not here?'

Alexander growled low in his throat; since when had *Clayton* been interested in Julie? He kicked at the railing in frustration, and noticed his boot had neatly bisected the vine that had been vainly reaching for higher ground.

* * * *

You dream of running. This dream is new, yet it feels old, like a shadow on a cave wall. You run on soft grass, hard, because the ground pulses with the wet footfalls at your back. Silver gleams and jabs at the corner of your vision. You fly, but the shadow behind you soars.

You catch a shock of red hair, vivid, clawing at the wind, and you don't look back again. There is a door,

looming, and here you seek refuge. The handle submits, and you enter the inner light. There are people.

Row upon row, line on line, each and every plugged in, wired up and logged on to their machines. Wires of blue and red coil from their tin headsets, snaking into the machines' guts. They turn their faces to you, fingers incessant at their consoles, and you freeze. They are eyeless. Tight, starkly white, lidless and unmoving. They stare without seeing, sheep peering blankly through the slats of the farmyard gate.

A flash of red, a million bloody needles, and you feel the sweat on the tread of your feet, and the silver claws at your back. The sheep do not blink.

The single, empty seat calls, one machine not yet humming in tune. And now you feel the breath on the nape of your neck, and the paw reaching out to offer the gift of silver morality. And now the call resounds, echoing the wild, the heat and the wind pressing in from East and West, fixing on your fulcrum, and now you no longer know which way to turn.

Caught in the paradox, frozen between the motion and the act. The moment stretches like rubber, into the heat-haze on the horizon, waiting for an answer that cannot find its voice.

The Burrower

28th October, 2010

He insisted on making dinner at exactly the same time every day. The kitchen was left wreathed in smoke, accompanied by the hazy tang of spiced chicken hanging in the air with an acrid after-scent like the bottom of an empty pan left to sizzle on the hob.

For Amanda, it was as if her home was the residence of a mouse stubbornly refusing to abandon its hole, burrowing ever deeper into the walls. Patric had moved in two weeks before her, which made his presence feel as immovable as the fixtures. He inserted himself at the head of the table, which allowed him to watch all comings and goings in the kitchen as he sat hunched over his food, picking at it leisurely. He gave the impression that his small, dark eyes could flick up at any moment like headlights, to trap anyone crossing his path.

Amanda tried to find ways to busy herself and keep out of Patric's way, though she inevitably had to clamber down the creaking stairs to the kitchen at certain points. At first she didn't notice the pattern, and cursed her luck whenever she happened upon Patric chomping his way through a bowl of rice, but after a week she realized his mealtimes were dictated by routine: Breakfast, often the re-heated remains of the previous night's meal, at ten-fifteen; a platter of pasta doused in nose-tingling sauce at one-thirty; and a meal of varying size and complexity at seven. He arranged his concoctions neatly on his plates, and even stored leftovers in easily-transportable plastic cases in one of the communal fridges. Amanda often had to squeeze

her chilled goods into gaps on the shelves due to Patric's store of uneaten meals.

Although the house was owned by a heavysset couple who had abandoned England for somewhere in France, Amanda liked to think of the grand building as her own. She had grown up with a deep-seated respect for her home, especially considering the state of many of the other Victorian houses in the area, badly in need of renovation that would never be funded. She clung on to her little provincial spirit like a flag to wave in the face of Patric's stubbornness.

The others in the house didn't seem to mind—at least, they never expressed any irritation at Patric's habits to Amanda. She was left to fume in silence, glaring covertly at Patric whenever she caught sight of him.

She broached the topic to Carol at a Patric-free moment while they both happened to be making toast. "I expected Patric to be in here, cooking up something dreadful," she said.

"Why's that?"

"I'm sure you've noticed," Amanda shrugged, "he's in here all the time. He practically lives in his cupboards."

"I can't say I've noticed. He makes quite a good tandoori chicken, though."

Amanda sniffed. "Can't say I've noticed. I don't go for that sort of stuff. I prefer home-grown recipes."

"Have you ever been abroad?"

Dizzying images of Pisa flashed through her mind, though Amanda simply made a non-committal grunt, and continued buttering her toast.

“It broadens your horizons, from a culinary point of view,” Carol said, though Amanda kept her back to the woman. “I had a wonderful paella just outside of Torrox—”

“I’m not for that sort of thing,” Amanda said, feeling like she was repeating herself. “British food is the best in the world, everyone knows that.”

“That sounds a little xenophobic, if you don’t mind me saying.”

Amanda bristled, and patiently explained that she wasn’t being racist, “but we know how to do things. Those others haven’t a clue.”

Carol thankfully deferred from talking, and quietly excused herself soon after with her plate of toast. Amanda sat herself at the head of the table, crossing her arms between every bite and staring at the door as if willing it to swing open.

She saw no sign of Patric for the rest of the day, though when she descended into the kitchen for an evening snack, she found a Tupperware box filled with a ghastly-looking puddle of rice shoved into her fridge—and directly in front of her jar of Robinson’s jam, no less. She wondered if Carol had said anything to Patric, leading him to take action against her. She hoped it was the case; Amanda decided she would relish the opportunity to put Patric to rights. It wasn’t proper that

one person should lord it over the rest of the household. Things just didn't work that way.

Carefully, and perhaps without conscious thought, Amanda hefted the Tupperware box in one hand and scooped out the contents into the dark recesses of the bin.

Lágrimas

12th August, 2010

A window is a light, and a light is a pathway. The constellations have lines drawn within them, hooking one star to another and fencing them in, making gardens out of the cosmos.

On his first trip to Spain, Dalton navigated the hectic roads to stand over the bluff at the edge of Nerja and gaze across the Mediterranean. He ignored the tourists milling around him, and squinted out at the hazy line on the horizon, trying to seek out a landmass. On a clear day—as Dalton had been reliably informed by a guide book—the view from the Balcony of Europe was a direct line-of-sight across to the north coast of Morocco. Dalton could see nothing but the vanishing point where sea met sky, but he continued looking all the same, screwing up his eyes as if the sun had made him half-blind.

He returned to his hotel having fruitlessly trawled the gift shops, and waited until nightfall.

The town remained a bustle of activity as he emerged from his lodgings at eleven thirty-five local time, and had to squeeze through the crowds to return to the balcony. He perched on the edge of the raised stone disc at the end of the boulevard, and again looked out to sea, despite the darkness shrouding his view. The sky was murky, with an orange tint to the underside of the clouds. Eventually, his neck began to ache, and he lowered himself carefully onto his back, to stare up at the night sky from the flat of the disc.

A man sat down next to him, crossing his legs and folding his hands in his lap. Dalton regarded him briefly.

He was casually dressed in plain shirt and shorts, and he was well tanned. 'English, are you?' the stranger asked, with an accent Dalton was unable to place.

'Yes, I am.'

'Thought so. Can spot you guys a mile off. Sunbed?'

Dalton shrugged. 'I thought I ought to start getting a tan before—well, before I start getting one, if you follow.'

'Most of the English get nice, white lines just under their collars and cuffs, where they've been too prudish to take their shirts off on the beach. And you're also looking at these other guys like they're locals, so you're still not used to your tan. You come here for the stargazing?'

'No, not really,' Dalton replied, unsure quite how the newcomer could have discerned all of that from a single look, but deciding to go along with it all the same. 'Nice, though. Much clearer than home.' Dalton paused, a flash of light having caught his eye. 'Are those comets?' he asked.

'Yeah, or meteors. Lágrimas de San Lorenzo. You picked the right day.'

Dalton cast his gaze around the balcony, noting other tourists looking up in excitement at the meteor shower twinkling far above. 'I didn't exactly come here to watch a light show.'

'No, I'm guessing you came here to get away from it all. The sunbed says it's a planned trip, but it's also your first time—maybe your first time anywhere abroad. Which means you have a very good reason for coming

here. Most first-timers would go to Barcelona or Madrid. Or Paris—or the Isle of Man, to be honest.’

Dalton regarded the man with a slight crease to his brow. ‘You seem very interested.’

‘It’s a hobby. I’m studying in the town. Social psych, all of that mind-reading voodoo.’

‘Ah,’ Dalton said. ‘I’m a social experiment, am I?’

‘In a slightly more civilized manner, I suppose,’ the man replied easily. ‘You’re not married, are you?’

Dalton feels his stomach sink with a sickly lurch, as if he had toppled into freezing waters. ‘Was that a guess?’ He held up his left hand, palm inward. The burnished band of gold gleamed in the reflected glow of the streetlamps.

‘Yeah, but you’re not married, are you?’

Dalton considered for a while, lowering his hand to pick idly at the ring with his right forefinger. ‘Known each other since college. Our eyes met over a sheet of geometry coursework—chance meeting, that sort of thing. Separated since Christmas.’

‘And you broke it off,’ the man stated, then, off Dalton’s frown, continued: ‘Because you’re still wearing the ring. If she’d left you, it would have come off; you wouldn’t want anything else to do with her if she dumped you. But you regret your decision, don’t you?’

‘How can you get all of that from whether or not I’ve got the ring on?’

The man tapped his temple. ‘Voodoo.’

‘Yes,’ Dalton sighed. ‘It was probably a mistake.’

‘So you’ve come looking for her.’

‘No.’ At this, Dalton sat up, staring out at the fading skyline for something to hook his gaze upon. ‘Honestly, I didn’t. She’s not even in Spain. Like I said—well, like you said, I suppose—I wanted to get away.’

The man smiled at Dalton’s side, and turned his eyes to the view. ‘Apparently,’ he said slowly, ‘you can see Morocco on a clear day.’

‘Apparently,’ Dalton echoed. ‘Haven’t yet.’

‘Me neither. Too many clouds. That orange colour comes from the sand. It’s in the air; in the raindrops.’

Another flash of light drew Dalton’s gaze upwards. Three tiny lines of fire could just be discerned up to the north, blazing across the sky. ‘What did you say they’re called?’

‘Lágrimas de San Lorenzo, says the guide books. The Tears of Saint Lawrence to your garden-variety Brit abroad. Saint Lawrence being some martyr or other. Typical witch-burning, Joan of Arc stuff.’

Dalton turned again to the tourists bustling around the two of them, intermittently glancing up at the lightshow. ‘We’re celebrating a man’s pain, then?’

‘Guess so,’ the man replied. ‘That’s nothing new—they’re glorified fireworks. There’s bound to be a sob story behind it.’

The meteors were beginning to fade, trailing off into the night. The tears were running dry. ‘It doesn’t seem right. We barely even know this bloke’s name, and everyone’s going *ooh* and *ahh* in his memory like it’s the Blackpool Illuminations.’

‘People make wishes when they see them,’ the man added. ‘They like to think chance and good fortune drops out of the blue.’

Dalton considered this. ‘Well, that’s all right. I bet he made a good few wishes, too. You’ve got to cling on to something,’ he said, lacing his fingers together.

‘Yeah.’ The man stood abruptly, and looked down at Dalton. ‘I’d better be off.’

Dalton tried to take the man’s suddenness in his stride. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘Nice to meet you.’

The man regarded him evenly. ‘How long are you staying for?’

‘I don’t know. I only booked one-way, in case I got a week but realized I hated it on the first day. I could always keep travelling, I suppose. Bit late for it, though.’

‘The night’s still young. This lot will still be going at five.’

‘A bit late in life. I could have done all of this when I came out of university. Everyone else did.’

The man shrugged. ‘Ah, well. No use crying over spilt milk.’

‘You’re the expert,’ Dalton replied with a wry look.

‘Only in voodoo,’ the man said, touching his forelock in a casual salute, and departing into the throng. Dalton watched him go, but lost sight of him after only a few moments, the tide of the crowd carrying the stranger from sight.

Dalton turned back to the balcony, and gazed sleepily out across the water. He caught a brief flash of light, just for an instant, burning ocean-green high over the

rolling waves, as if illuminating some distant pasture.
Then it was gone, and the night prevailed once again,
covering the still, midnight-blue waters.

TOM MENARY
2010-2011